CULTURAL GUIDE TO
LONDON

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PREFACE

This guide has been prepared specifically because London, for many Americans, is an unexpectedly difficult post. Delighted to be going to an English-speaking country made familiar through books and films, but unprepared for the cultural differences they will experience, many American visitors find disillusionment replacing their high expectations after only a few weeks. More and better preparation before arrival in London may be useful, as will the willingness to seek out people and groups who can give support and encouragement as you settle in.

The aim of this guide is to provide a broadly based working background, supplemented by some practical detail, as one aspect of preparation for a British posting. Of course, Americans come in many varieties, and so do the British. Each traveler to Britain will perceive life here differently, building up an overview made up of a series of unique experiences. A culture guide that tried to cover the full range of possible encounters, taking into account regional, class, and other differences, would be a vast work of limited use to the short-term resident. Nevertheless, some generalizations that can be made may be useful.

The guide has been written specifically for U.S. Government employees who plan to live in the London area for two or more years. It therefore concentrates mainly on the Southeast, and on middle-class behavioral patterns. If you should find yourself spending the evening in a working-class home in Lancashire, you are doing very well and have moved beyond the scope of the guide.

Groundwork is important, but when the going gets rough, be prepared to also seek out supportive members of the American community. Everyone will have been through some of the same frustrations, and you may need support from your own cultural group to counterbalance the pressures you will feel.

I have lived in London for 17 years and my children have never lived anywhere else. Most of the time, I love it: the city, the countryside, the British people in general, and my friends and acquaintances in particular. I did find many things difficult at first, however, and no matter how long I stay, I shall continue to suffer some degree of “culture stress.” Your best companion is probably your sense of humor: a good laugh can dispel quite a lot of London fog. Good reading and good adventures!

INTRODUCTION

There is so much in Britain to interest and delight every member of the family: you may be surprised to discover the great variety this small island affords, each area having quite a different look and feel, with its people proud of their particular traditions and ways. In London you will find yourself in an exciting multicultural city, modern and easy to get around in, but rich with treasures of art and architecture, and crowded with atmospheric pockets of history. Of course, your visit will be made easier by the fact that you will—with a little practice—be able to understand the people, and make yourself understood. Although the vocabulary and accents differ, we do share a language and its literature. Or do we? One of the aspects of your British posting which you may find the most surprising and unsettling is that while we share many words (though often not the words for ordinary things), we do not share the same language. Most of the non-verbal components of the language, and the cultural assumptions which lie behind them, are quite unfamiliar to us. Perhaps it is just as well to realize that, some words apart, the language and cultural environment of Britain are quite different, and adjusting is not always easy.

You may find that some commonplace transaction has made you furious, or that you deem to be causing some irritation unintentionally. When that happens, it is often because you have stumbled onto an area of cultural misunderstanding. These mishaps will occur, and can be survived; it may help to know that no one is getting you personally. It is unfortunate that it is in the important area of meeting people and making friends that some important cultural differences occur, and coming across these may sometimes leave you feeling flat.

Try to remember that while you will not always find it easy, you do have a lot going for you. Preparation makes a difference, and perhaps some of the comments here will help you to make the most of your experiences. Through the differences you may be able to perceive the wit, tolerance, and generosity of these rather shy and private people. You come equipped for the task with cultural experience in reaching out to others and generating enthusiasm. Your ready friendliness will be your greatest asset.

May you enjoy your adventure and discover much to delight you in the sights and the people of Great Britain!

PART I - A GENERAL VIEW

BROAD THEMES: VALUES

British Reserve

Perhaps the most immediately obvious unfamiliar cultural theme in British life is the importance of personal privacy. This is sometimes described as “reserve,” and it includes a general reluctance to show or share emotion readily. For example, language and gesture express more restraint and neutrality as desirable components of courtesy, even in what seem to us quite informal situations. British reserve does not mean that you will meet people who are dour, ungenerous, abrupt, or cold—quite the reverse. You will probably feel that most of the people you meet are very polite, friendly, and helpful. But it does mean that, in this society, people are trained from childhood to be self-contained and not to betray very much about themselves or their emotions to others. When confronted with self-revealing, enthusiastic, feeling-sharing Americans, the British person may feel uncomfortable, and may either withdraw or make a joke. The British share feelings mainly within the family or within the framework of a long-standing friendship.

This concept of privacy includes such things as the expectation that people will try to be largely self-sufficient. People do not ask for favors lightly, for example, and they usually feel that they should be repaid as soon as is convenient.

Many of the sorts of questions Americans are accustomed to ask each other when establishing an acquaintance are, to British ears, intrusive, especially when they explore areas of status. There can be sensitivity surrounding questions about occupation, educational background, or any area revealing social background; the more homogeneous the group, the less disturbing such questions might be, but in general, it is best to let such information emerge, rather than ask direct questions.

The area that may engender the most sensitivity toward this reserve is in the establishment of friendships, which can be much slower in the making. During the early months of your stay, when adjustments are hitting you hardest, you may feel that no one is available with whom to share your feelings, and that you are friendless and isolated. Early on, you may have to rely heavily on your American friends for support; this is a feature of the fact that British people tend to keep their feelings to themselves, and tolerate isolation as a part of the privacy they covet. They may not initiate meetings as often as you might think usual, and may go for longer intervals without much contact, even though the elements of friendship are present. You may feel that you have to work hard at the development of these relationships, and you may have to be patient as they grow. Give it time, and you can develop strong and interesting friendships in Britain, just as anywhere else.

Tolerance

A development of this reserve, which complements it, is the very high regard the British have for individuality and their tolerance of a wide range of behavior and attitudes. A respect for personal preference exists, which means that you will have considerable scope for dressing as you wish and managing your personal affairs without comment. The same cultural pressures that may contribute to feelings of isolation may, on the other hand, allow

you to feel considerable freedom from the constraints of conformity. Your way of doing things will be accepted as just that: an expression of your interests, priorities, and background.

As Americans, we stand outside the perimeters of the social structure and, therefore, enjoy tremendous freedom. Because this is so, when they notice our different behaviors the British tolerate them with much patience and good humor.

Reluctance to Change

A third area of British cultural life that may be striking to Americans is the strong regard for maintaining the status quo. This expresses itself not so much as reverence for the past, but as the idea that if it was good enough for my father (or grandfather), it is good enough for me. “Progress is our most important product” is a slogan with limited appeal. People who are wealthy enough to afford more and better seem perfectly satisfied with older, less efficient models of common appliances, for example. Appearances mean rather less to the British than to Americans. This generalization applies not only to personal appearance, but also to the fact that public buildings will often not look very modern or not be attractively designed and decorated. Do not be put off by a hospital or school that appears to be crumbling or old-fashioned. The care or education you receive within those Victorian-looking rooms can be second to none.

There are few active efforts to improve things, and change is often seen as disruptive and unnecessary. Americans value enthusiasm and innovation; we attack problems vigorously and tend to throw ideas (even half-baked ones) into the arena for consideration. The British are more inclined to consider carefully before offering a thoroughly processed suggestion. Americans can dominate discussions just because we are willing to take these risks, or else we come away feeling deflated and depressed by the lack of interest and spontaneity we find. When coupled with the British emotional reserve, this satisfaction with the status quo and lack of obvious enthusiasm can make it feel as if life here lacks drive and fun. It would be more true to suggest that the British prefer not to change unless it is quite clear that the change will be an improvement.

Attitudes Toward Efficiency and Success

Much modernization has come to Britain, particularly in the last decade, but efficiency as a concept to be prized above others is not a part of life here. Americans are accustomed to assessing their environment in terms of efficiency: energy conservation, productivity evaluations, time and motion studies, and the like, are all familiar to us. The British are not of this mindset; efficiency as such is relatively unimportant. Certainly, it is less important than tradition, social grace, and the non-confrontational relationship. The British are also unimpressed or even suspicious of achievement-based success. They value professional workers, politicians, and leaders of industry who are generalists and amateurs over the whiz kids. When Americans mention their achievements, it sounds to British ears like boasting and is, therefore, rather suspect. This attitude has been changing, partially due to the Thatcher years, there has been a rise of meritocracy and the political elevation of a new generation of whiz kids. As these values change, they cause wide-reaching social change.

Social Mobility and Social Change

Many Western countries have found social change difficult in the latter part of the 20th century, and Britain is no exception, especially as its traditions are strong and highly valued. Despite increased social mobility in recent years, British society is still bound to a considerable extent by class-determined constraints. In our traditionally mobile society, people consciously strive to raise their standards of living and can move rapidly within the social structure as they do so. In British society, social change tends to occur much more slowly; this conservatism contributes to the stability of the culture, but can feel static to us.

Ralph Turner, writing in the *American Sociological Review*, identifies two kinds of social mobility: *contest* mobility, in which the top positions in the society are filled principally by the proving of ability and effort of the member of society, and *sponsored* mobility, in which members already in the upper strata choose recruits to the leading positions, not so much by individual merit, but by selection from their class. Institutions have great control over mobility in this type of society. In Britain, both forms exist, but the sponsored form is dominant. The public school is one of the most powerful institutions controlling social movement. This theme is noted later, in the section on education and in the comments on the importance of the introduction.

Although not previously a "melting pot," Britain has quite suddenly become a multicultural country, experiencing an influx of Commonwealth immigration since World War II. This is particularly true in London and other urban centers, which now have large Asian, African, and West Indian populations. It is current policy of the highest priority in London schools to help teachers and pupils understand and accept fully the values of a non-racist, non-sexist society. But the schools, especially those in London, have been less successful in combating the old class rigidities, and this must, in part, be due to the traditional role the schools have played in controlling class movement.

Class identities affect people deeply and feature largely in social issues, from education reform to labor relations. In this connection, it may be useful to note that the distribution of wealth is far more highly concentrated in the United Kingdom than in the United States. In the United Kingdom, 5 percent of the population holds about 50 percent of the country's wealth. In addition, 7 million Britons (one-eight of the population) live at or below the minimum level of income thought necessary by the government to provide a basic living wage.

Some General Observations

Other broad observations that might be made about the British cultural environment include the importance of loyalty, respect for authority, and the acceptance of hierarchical structures. British people generally deeply value loyalty to Queen and country, to family, to school, and to friends. It is assumed that loyalty of this sort is universally shared. Political disagreements can be boisterous and cutting, but it is quite possible to express extremely negative remarks about the government currently in power without implying disloyalty to country or countrymen.

The British also generally show respect for position and authority to a great extent. For example, it is generally felt that the police have a difficult task and deserve public support; there is often a particularly high regard for the local bobby on his beat. Doctors, professors, teachers, and other authority figures are not accustomed to having to justify to patients and pupils, for example, each decision they make. You may find that your questions and comments on your child's schooling, for example, or on your dental or medical care may be considered intrusive. In fact, whether it is due to respect for position or unwillingness to make a scene, the British complain very little about poor service, poor-quality goods, or other circumstances.

You may be interested to note the different sorts of fads that seem to reflect cultural differences. In many ways, the power of advertising and mass appeal is less felt in a nation that prizes individuality and tradition. The pressures to conform are considerably less: your British acquaintances will not necessarily jog, eat high-fiber foods, or buy a compact-disc player, but even if they do, they will not feel that you should join them in doing these things. American fads often center around health and fitness. You will not be able to understand why they are all so oblivious to modern concerns about saturated fats and exercise, for example; they will not understand why you are getting yourself so worked up about the way they choose to live their lives. The British are more likely, on the other hand, to take an interest in changing clothes and hairstyles, and your teenagers may embrace their peer-group enthusiasms by sporting astonishing adornments of all kinds.

If you like animals, you will share this value with Britons from all walks of life. The British are fond of animals, and dogs are the special favorite. It has been suggested that charities concerned with animal welfare inspire more interest than those concerned with human life. In her book, *Class*, Jilly Cooper even claims that aristocrats are fonder of their dogs than of their wives and mothers. Certainly, a dog can be a useful focus for congenial conversation and an asset for meeting people.

When you are trying to work up a smile to help bridge the culture gaps, you may discover that British humor is rather different, and you may not always share amusement. For the most part, humor takes the form of very dry, often ironic understatement. You may not always know when your dinner companion is trying to be amusing, because comments will be delivered with a straight face in an offhand manner that is often puzzling to Americans. Even when the humor is broader, it is not always familiar; for example, the surest way to enrapture a television audience seems to be for a man to don women's clothing. He need not then do anything, apparently; the costume change seems to be enough.

Wheelchair Accessibility in London

Steep steps and high curbs, cobblestones and narrow passages. The tube, taxis, no place to park. Walking, you are told, is the preferred way to get around town. If walking is difficult or impossible for you, your first reaction to London may be one of discouragement. Take heart—there is an accessible side to London. Finding access to the places you want to go can be a challenge, but it can be done, and is well worth the effort.

Shopping may take some exploring to find what works best for you. Shopping malls are few, but do have parking lots with disabled spaces, as do some large supermarkets and stores (e.g., Safeway, Tesco). On your local high street you will usually find at least a few shops with level or ramped entrances. Most corner curbs have cutouts—if not, detours are usually available, e.g., a nearby driveway or another corner. The sidewalks tend to be rough, with uneven cement, cobblestones, and unexpected drops.

Getting around London with limited mobility requires some planning. Many museums or galleries prefer that you call before you come. Although a bother, this can result in a reserved parking space and directions to the accessible entrance. Two good resources are the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation (RADAR) 12 City Forum, 250 City Rd. London EC1V 8AF (020-7250-3222) and Artsline, 54 Chalton ST. London NW1 1HS (020-7388-2227). Both of these groups publish books and pamphlets that contain accessibility details about museums, galleries, theaters, and tourist attractions in and around London.

People are generally quite willing to help. Some people are surprised at the notion of a self-sufficient person with a disability. “You’re a self-driver?!” Systems designed to make a public place accessible sometimes seem to make more work. There may be a wheelchair accessible restroom, but you must find a staff member to unlock it for you. A lift to the main entrance of the museum requires a security guard with the key. Patience, courtesy, and a sense of humor are definite assets.

In late 1995 Parliament passed the Disability Discrimination Act. However, resultant changes are not expected to be far-reaching, and many will not be implemented for several years. Meanwhile several local and national disability groups continue working to document and improve access and to broaden awareness of the need for it.

BROAD THEMES: INSTITUTIONS AND POLITICS

Church of England

The Church of England is the established church in Britain; that is, it is recognized as the official church of the nation and is supported by the civil authority. The Queen is both Head of State and Head of the Church, as well as being head of many other institutions such as the Commonwealth, the Civil Service, and the Guards. The Church was also, until the 19th century, the main provider of education. Although participation in religious activities is declining in Britain (as determined by church membership and numbers of church weddings), the Church of England and other large religious groups continue to exert good deal of influence. The Church of England holds considerable wealth, especially in the form of land and property; its bishops sit in the House of Lords; religious instruction is required in the school curriculum, and the church has a role expressing concern over contemporary issues, such as divorce and abortion. It is not uncommon to be asked to state one’s religion on forms of all sorts, particularly admission forms for schools.

A part of the fabric of the state and its public rituals since its origin in the break with Rome in 1534, the Church is continually visible in government functions, public pronouncements, and in the school curriculum.

The Church of Scotland is also an established church, headed by the sovereign, although in nature it is quite unlike the Church of England. Anthony Sampson in *The Changing Anatomy of Britain* writes, "In remarkable contrast to the Church of England is its neighbor, the Church of Scotland, and the coexistence of these two disparate bodies is one of the oddest features of the kingdom: when the Queen comes to Edinburgh each year, she becomes suddenly Scottish, and head of a Church which is Calvinistic, Presbyterian, and hostile to bishops." Roman Catholics constitute the largest minority religious group, with numbers exceeding those of the Church of England in some surveys. There are still some restrictions on offices Catholics can hold, and a certain amount of distance between the two groups exists, which may be lessening with current ecumenical developments.

The largest groups of non-Anglican Protestants (called Non-conformists, Dissenters, or members of Free Churches) are Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians, with the important Quaker and Unitarian voices represented by smaller numbers. The historic division between Church and Chapel has lessened with the growth of the ecumenical movement, which has brought, in particular, attempts at unity between Anglicans and Methodists.

Since the population movements connected with World War II and the more recent spurts of Commonwealth immigration, many non-Christian communities in Britain are active and growing. Jews represent about 1 percent of the British population, while Muslims, Hindus, and many other Eastern religions have growing populations, resulting in many traditional practices coming under examination. This aspect of multicultural Britain is particularly evident within the schools, which have had to take a new look at regulations concerning religious assemblies, school dinners, and school uniforms, for example.

Central Government

While the United Kingdom is a constitutional monarchy, it does not have a written constitution, only an informally understood set of rules and practices which the British government has developed over the years, and which can be changed at any time, simply by passing a law. Queen Elizabeth II is the Head of State; Prime Minister Tony Blair is the Prime Minister (PM) and Head of Government, and Parliament is the chief lawmaking body.

The two Houses of Parliament meet in the Palace of Westminster. Parliament is divided into two chambers: the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Of these, the House of Commons is, by far, the more important. The House has 659 Members of Parliament (MPs) who have been elected by simple majority vote of the adult population from districts called constituencies, which contain an average population of some 60,000 electors. The government of the day can call an election for the House of Commons at any time, but must do so at least every five years. Most of the MPs belong to one of the three major parties: Labour, the Conservatives (also called Tories) and the Liberal Democrats. There are also several smaller regional parties, and one Independent Member of Parliament. After an election, the leader of the party with the most MPs is asked by the Queen to become prime minister and form a government. (If no single party controls a majority of the Commons, the new prime minister may have to form a coalition of several parties, though this has not happened since World War II.) The prime minister chooses MPs to join his cabinet and run

the various ministries or departments of state. Members of the Cabinet are called Secretaries of State and are responsible for administering their departments with the help of civil servants. They are also responsible for introducing and defending in Parliament any draft legislation relevant to their departments.

The second largest party in Parliament is known as the official opposition, and their leader (currently the head of the Tory Party, William Hague) bears the title Leader of the Opposition. Its role is to present itself as an alternative government, criticizing and opposing government policy and performance. The leader of the opposition appoints a team of party spokesmen, the Shadow Cabinet, to shadow the workings of every government department, and put forward alternative policies.
The principal function of the House of Lords is to review legislation from the Commons and to suggest amendments to it. The House of Lords contains three types of lords, or peers: Hereditary Peers who hold titles (duke, marquess, earl, viscount and baron), which can be inherited by their heirs; Life Peers (also called Life Barons), mostly distinguished individuals and former politicians, whose titles are not inherited by their descendents; and the two archbishops and another 24 senior bishops of the Church of England (also called the Lords Spiritual). Among the Life Peers are a group of senior judges, called the Law Lords, who function as the United Kingdom's most senior court of appeal.

The House of Lords has had its powers considerably reduced since 1911, when the Parliament Act was passed, giving the Commons the right to overrule the Lords if it rejected the same bill in two successive annual sessions of Parliament. In 1999 Parliament enacted a new law removing the right of all but 92 of hereditary peers to sit in the House of Lords. This reduced its numbers from over 1,200 members to less than 700. This is an interim measure while the government considers what role the House of Lords is to serve in future. The Labour government argued that the old system, where unelected, hereditary peers could play a key political role, was essentially undemocratic. It was also motivated by the fact that the old system gave the Conservatives an automatic majority in the Lords, which it sometimes used to postpone passage of bills which had passed the Commons.

Political Parties and Issues

The Labour Party, with Tony Blair as Prime Minister, has been the party in power since the May 1, 1997, general election. After being the opposition party for 18 years, Labour now has 410 of the 659 seats in the House of Commons. When Tony Blair was elected party leader in 1994, he instituted substantial reforms in the party platform. He revised the party constitution to eliminate language calling for the nationalization of the economy. Blair also reduced the amount of control labor unions had over the party machinery, and adopted a strong anti-crime stance. Even though these positions brought Labour closer to policies adopted by the Tories under Margaret Thatcher, Labour remained committed to more wide-ranging social-welfare policies, e.g., support for the National Health Service and jobs creation programs for unemployed youth.

With the loss of its majority in the May 1, 1997, election, the Conservative Party became the opposition. The party elected William Hague as its then leader. In 2001 William Hague

stepped down and Iain Duncan was elected as the new leader. The party now faces the task of regaining the support it has lost over recent years. From 1979, when Margaret Thatcher became prime minister, the Conservatives adopted a strong effort to privatize businesses that had been nationalized by previous Labour governments, e.g., the railway system, the airlines, most of the automobile industry, and the steel and coal industries. Selling government-owned houses and apartments ("council flats") to their occupants, a program pioneered in Thatcher's second administration, was probably the most popular and successful of her reforms. Her effort to reform the country's local tax system, however, proved disastrously unpopular. It led to campaigns of civil disobedience and contributed to her ouster.

When John Major replaced Mrs. Thatcher as prime minister in 1990, he repealed Thatcher's poll tax system, but faced serious difficulties over Britain's ties to the European Union, about which the Tories were (and are) deeply divided. An economic crisis in 1992 caused a collapse in the value of the pound and a serious recession. This, plus the EU ban on British beef exports due to "mad cow" disease (bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or BSE) added to a series of financial and personal scandals, all of which culminated in a decline in support for the Tories and their eventual defeat in the latest elections.

The Liberal Democrats are the third-largest British party. Having won 53 seats in the latest election, they now have more MPs than at any time since the 1930s. For many years the Liberal Democrats maintained a policy of equidistance between Labour and the Tories. Recently, they have cooperated with Labour on some constitutional issues—a relationship which has had its ups and downs. Other parties represented in Parliament are the Scottish National Party (campaigning for Scottish independence), Plaid Cymru* (the Welsh nationalist party), and parties of Northern Ireland (Ulster Unionist, Democratic Unionist, Social Democratic and Labour, and the UK Unionist). The Sinn Fein party won four seats in the House of Commons, but its representatives refused to take the oath of office, which includes a statement of loyalty to the Queen, and thus have not yet been allowed to occupy their seats.

Devolution in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales

A major campaign pledge by the Labour Party was devolution of power from the central government in London to local regional authorities through the creation of a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly. In addition to the creation of these two bodies, a new Northern Ireland Assembly has come about as the result of the peace process. All three bodies were endorsed by local referendums.

In July 1999, a newly established Scottish Parliament accepted powers over agriculture, economic development, education, environment, health, law and order, local government, social work, and transport. Meanwhile, Parliament in Westminster retains responsibility for defense, employment, international relations, national finance and economics, and social

* pronounced "Plied Kum-ree."

security. Unlike the Welsh and Northern Ireland bodies, the Scottish Parliament has some limited powers to raise or reduce taxes in the province.

After 27 years of direct rule from the central government in Westminster, most powers have been devolved to the Northern Ireland government in a series of steps called for in the Good Friday Agreement of 1997. The Northern Ireland Assembly began to function in 1998, and the Executive was established in December 1999. The new Northern Ireland institutions have accepted responsibility for all public services not considered reserved for the central government. Reserved services include security, taxation, foreign affairs and defense. The continuation of the devolved Northern Ireland institutions depends on further progress on other elements of the Good Friday Agreement, specifically decommissioning of weapons held by paramilitary organizations. Currently, the Northern Ireland Assembly was suspended as of October 14, 2002.

The powers devolved to the newly created National Assembly for Wales are more limited than those inherited by the new Northern Ireland Assembly and the Scottish Parliament. In May 1999 the National Assembly for Wales accepted power from the central government to decide on its priorities and allocate funds in a range of policy areas including agriculture, economic development, education and training, highways, housing local government, social services, and transport. However, the Welsh Assembly does not have the power to enact legislation.

Further devolution of powers from the central government, nationalist independence movements in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, Britain's relationship with the European Union and whether or not it will join the single European currency, will continue to be prominent issues in U.K. politics for the foreseeable future.

SOME COMMONLY PERCEIVED PROBLEMS PARTICULAR TO THIS POSTING

Attitudes Toward Children

In general, social roles and issues are similar to those in the United States. Attitudes toward male and female roles vary according to social class and other sub-groups, and contemporary interest in examining these roles may also mean that attitudes differ according to age. Among younger, middle-class people, for instance, there is more interest in equalizing gender roles, especially with regard to household tasks and child-rearing. The traditional gender roles have undergone less change for working-class people, however. In the general area of roles and relationships, most Americans will find their attitudes reflected in those of their British counterparts. One area in which there are noticeable differences is the attitude toward children.

Children are spontaneous, obvious about displaying their emotions, and they sometimes enjoy being the center of attention. These are all qualities not highly valued by the culture, and so children undergo a continual process of socialization to teach them acceptable adult behaviors, such as waiting and talking quietly and learning to control their emotional

displays. Often, children are not included in social activities, but when they are, the expectation is that they will either go off and play (absent themselves from the adults) or behave like mini-adults. In contrast to the British custom, children on the continent and in the United States are included in many social activities, are often seen in restaurants, and seem to be enjoyed by the adults around them.

In Britain, children sometimes seem to be slightly second-class citizens: little is provided solely for their benefit; they are expected to make way for the adults, fit in around adult activities, and, above all, they are expected to sit still and be quiet. American children, therefore, can seem boisterous and demanding, while British children seem composed and grown-up. This contrast also applies to the adults in the two cultures, a theme which will be developed later.

In other ways, British children seem more protected and kept in their subordinate place. The divide separating adults and children is marked, and fewer activities are planned to involve both groups. British children also have few regular chores; their homework is often very demanding, and parents require little else of them. Throughout primary school and through much of secondary school, children are accompanied and ferried around to a considerable extent. Parents or helpers walk or drive youngsters to and from school and other activities, often without recourse to the car pool or other sharing methods.

The aspects of life in Britain which American adults find most difficult are also difficult for their children: social isolation, personal reserve, and the centering of life on the family group all pose problems for families with children. The information booklet prepared by the Canadian Government's Women's Association in Great Britain puts the case very strongly:

> Families with Children:
>
> A London posting for those without children or with children over 12 offers an unparalleled adventure in every respect. Those with children under 12, used to a normal Canadian environment, if housed in central London, will find very serious limitations in terms of accommodation, informal access to playgrounds, need for supervision, informal access to other children, lack of facilities for children in hotels and restaurants, babysitting, household help, recreation rooms, complaining neighbors in adjacent flats or nearby tables, and so on.

This is a rather gloomy picture, but worth noting because it may help you to prepare your children. Their friendships, too, will be slow to develop, and you will be central to many of their activities, certainly at first.

Education

The families of American children in London have a wide choice of schools. You may wish to explore British schools as well as the several American ones available. Listed in the bibliography are some publications for parents who are interested in British schools, and you may find it helpful to consult one of the specialist organizations that advise on placement, such as the Independent Schools Information Service (ISIS), 3 Vandon Street, London SW1. As in the United States, you will have a choice between the state school

system and the private or independent sector. For various reasons, the top public schools are usually inaccessible to children of American government employees, but this does not mean that they cannot find a place in a school that will afford an excellent education.

British schools differ from American ones in terms of curriculum content and general atmosphere. These differences are particularly important for youngsters ages 14–17. The standard of education is generally high, but not always parallel or transferable. In Britain, 14–16-year-olds study for examinations which will award them the General Certificate of Education (GCE) at Ordinary ("O") Level in 6–10 subjects, including English language, English literature, mathematics, science and social studies subjects, and foreign languages. Pupils ages 16–19 study two or three subjects intensively for two years, leading to examinations which will award them the GCE at Advanced ("A") Level. In general, preparation for these exams requires a very focused, traditionally academic kind of education; British schoolchildren specialize much earlier than their American counterparts, and the training is not designed to produce very original or creative thinking. On the other hand, the products of this system are trained to research topics thoroughly, to express themselves well in written and spoken English, and are very knowledgeable in their chosen areas of concentration.

Children at most schools are required to wear a uniform and will receive religious instruction of a non-denominational Christian character. The school year is divided into three terms; each term includes one week's holiday at half term (mid-term) and there are at least 2–3 weeks off at Christmas and Easter. The summer holiday is, however, shorter than for American schools: usually about seven weeks, including the entire month of August.

Because the school system is so closely associated with social class in Britain, the issue of "which school?" can be highly charged with emotion. It is best to seek advice very widely and to bear in mind the particular needs and interests of your own child, who, after all, is unlikely to be party to prevailing social issues for very long. For the British child, the choice of school has vast and permanent implications; for his parents, the choice of school has its roots in deeply personal and political issues. You can skirt these and choose much more freely, in the knowledge that your child's sojourn into British education is, however important, relatively brief, and educational values can take precedence over social ones in your case.

As you receive advice from British sources, it may be helpful for you to have some background about the significance of education and the role of the school in contemporary Britain. In his book, *The Changing Anatomy of Britain*, in a chapter entitled "The Ruling Tribes," Anthony Sampson comments on the role of the educational establishment in the overall social structure. Bear in mind as you read this passage that Eton and Winchester are relatively small schools (not colleges or universities), that places in them are not gained by competitive examination only, and that they are inaccessible to the vast majority of the population. Eton has 1,250 boys aged 12–18 and Winchester, 630—less than 2,000 boys to set against the entire school population of the country.

> Behind all the swings and changes of the last decade is there any meaning left in the old idea of the Establishment?… Certainly school and university

> backgrounds have lost some of their significance in Parliament…Yet alongside this new meritocracy there still remains a remarkable elite which has maintained its continuity and influence through all the political upheavals. Few people in the early Wilson years would have predicted that in 1982, the Chairman of the BBC, the Editor of The Times, the Foreign Secretary, the heads of both the foreign and civil services, and half the chairmen of the big four banks would all be Old Etonians, while the Home Secretary, the Chancellor, the Director-General of the BBC, a bevy of judges, and the other two bank chairmen would come from Winchester. Such a lasting duopoly must surely have some significance in Britain's anatomy…. The most fundamental criticism of the public school elite is the most obvious one: that it reinforces and perpetuates a class system whose divisions run through all British institutions, separating language, attitudes, motivations.

By and large, it is probably still true that the class system is alive and well in Britain today, and that schools still play some part in that fact.

Attitudes Toward Health and Health Care

There are no particular health hazards connected with living in Britain. Important differences exist, however, in attitudes toward health and health care, which you may wish to bear in mind. Several different themes of cultural disparity come together in the issue of health care, and these can make communication and mutual understanding difficult. Remember that while the standard of medicine is excellent, and the care you can receive second to none, you may be under considerable stress while in an unfamiliar environment—unfamiliar both physically and emotionally. When the issue is a serious health problem, you will want the communication to be as smooth and uncomplicated as possible, and that is why it may be valuable to consider the cultural environment in which these sorts of transactions take place.

It may seem that Americans take health matters more seriously than the British. We are concerned about improving our general health, and prolonging life, by taking decisions about the way we live and care for our bodies. The British often seem to have a more relaxed attitude toward health, accepting the inevitability of deterioration and discomfort to a greater extent than we are accustomed to. This can make it seem as if health-care workers are not doing enough to help us with our health problems, or that they do not care enough. In addition to this general difference in attitudes, there are considerable legal and traditional differences. Patients in Britain do not have legally supported access to their medical records, and protection of medical records from other members of the family and employers, for example, is often felt to be an important issue of medical ethics. Doctors, dentists, and other deliverers of health care are accustomed to making decisions and giving advice in the form of a considered opinion, without necessarily feeling that they must fully inform the patient of all the possible options.

If you want to be actively involved in the decisions surrounding your care, and if you want to make certain that you are fully informed about your treatment, you will have to make that very clear to your doctor. Remember that you are in a country in which the consumer, or

patient in this case, customarily takes a relatively passive role, and the doctor may not expect that you may feel differently.

Even when you have made your wishes clear, you may find that communication styles are different enough that you are not hearing the message that the doctor is delivering. The polite buffering manner in which unpleasant or confrontational information is passed in Britain obscures it from us. So, it will be up to you to keep pressing on with questions, but if you do, you will find that your doctors will respond.

Social Isolation

Travelers expect to experience a certain amount of isolation when they take up residence in another country. It is mentioned particularly because Americans often do not expect to feel so much isolation in Britain, but they nearly always do, and can suffer quite acutely. It is hard to be separated from those dear to you; it is hard to make new friends, work with a different set of colleagues, find familiar articles in unfamiliar places. These things will still be difficult, despite the fact that you are in a Western, English-speaking country.

It is also difficult to accept that the joy you may have felt about coming to Britain, and the kinship you may feel with the people, are feelings largely unreciprocated by the population here. You will have to rely heavily at first on the American community, and when you feel supported by this contact, you will be able to get out into the local community. Along with the problems, there are, of course, tremendous rewards for your efforts at getting to know British people: in addition to making lasting friendships with interesting people, you will begin to experience life through the eyes of others with quite a different point of view.

Driving

Driving is a problem in Britain. It is not only a question of learning to look, react, and reach for things in different places; these crowded islanders drive with rather different attitudes and quite different rules of the road. You will have to learn new rules for the right-of-way and the use of the “roundabout,” or traffic circle. In London, it is often necessary to drive quite aggressively. In and out of London, the roads are narrow and twisting, and are used by cyclists, sheep, and chains of slow-moving, heavy vehicles.

If you plan to drive, the first thing you must do is get a copy of the Highway Code, available through newsstands and bookstores. This booklet also contains useful information for cyclists and pedestrian—the rules are different for them, too. Some notes to consider:

- A pedestrian in a zebra crossing (white lines crossing the street, with orange lights on either side) has the right of way, and you must stop. The approaches to these crossings are marked by zig-zag lines, and you may never park on them.
- In a roundabout, you must yield to the traffic already in the circle (i.e., coming from your right).
- The speed limit is 30 mph on any road with streetlights, unless otherwise indicated. The speed limit on motorways is 70 mph.

- Double broken white lines across an intersection mean yield ("give way") to cross traffic; double solid white lines mean stop. In fact, many indications are painted onto the road surface in this way, rather than being marked by signs.
- A grid of yellow lines at an intersection means you must not enter the intersection unless you can clear it before the light changes.
- The horn is rarely used in England, and only as a warning, not as a sign of exasperation. After dark, and often in daytime, drivers warn by flashing their headlights instead of sounding the horn.

A recent study of Americans living in Britain on business and military posting has indicated that driving is felt to be a major problem. It takes practice to relearn mechanical driving habits, and space for practicing is very limited. In fact, lack of space is a problem even after the mechanical aspects are under control. Streets are narrow and crowded, and parking is very limited: many large stores have no parking facilities at all. But, on the positive side, do remember that public transportation systems are good, especially in central London. You will be able to rely on buses, subway trains, and an above-ground railway system for getting around. You will also find that London is a very easy and rewarding city to walk in, and you will probably do more enjoyable walking than you might imagine.

Weather

Strictly speaking, of course, problems connected with the weather do not originate in social or cultural differences. However, learning to cope with the weather is a problem particular to this post, and it affects attitudes, styles of dress, entertainment, and conversation. Many American writers, commenting on the British weather, try to remind themselves of how little rain actually falls—less than on New York City, for example. One needs to remember this because it sometimes seems to be raining all the time. The distinction between a rainy day and a not-rainy day is (very often) not at all clear. Paul Theroux writes about stepping out into the day: "It was cool and damp; the weather forecast was 'scattered showers'—it was the forecast for Britain nearly every day of the year."

The point is that nothing in an objective assessment of the weather conditions prevalent in Britain is likely to prepare you for the power it will have to depress you. Although the winters are not severe, the cold is bone chilling and damp. Some houses and many public buildings seem drafty and chilly. Winter days are short, and people draw into their homes. Even spring can be difficult—because it is so long in coming. The rain, while not often stormy or heavy, seems to go on interminably. Just as Eskimos have a multitude of words for snow, the British weatherman has dozens of phrases to describe rain: "scattered showers with rainy intervals," "sunny intervals with outbreaks of thunder rain," and the like.

The additional walking necessary in London is not made more tolerable by sleet or drizzle, and even when you get indoors, the temperature is not always comfortable or predictable. Indoors, as well as outdoors, temperatures change rapidly: "If you don't like the weather, wait a minute," goes the saying. Shepherd Mead, in his book, *How to Live Like a Lord* (a wonderfully humorous book about the pitfalls awaiting the American visitor to Britain), comments: "Within the temperate range, the actual temperature of the part of the room or section of the pavement you are standing in at any given moment may vary from minute to

minute. One common way to cope with this problem is the heavy cardigan. It goes on and off as needed. Not always chic, perhaps, but neither are goose-pimples or flushed cheeks." Warmth and comfort count for more than brightness and style; the smell of damp wool pervades many a social gathering, and in cold weather even cocktail parties are attended in somber-colored heavy tweeds.

In fact, not only does the temperature change often, the difference between indoor and outdoor temperatures is not always as great as Americans may be used to. The British often, therefore, do dress in layers, which can go on and off, as required.

Outdoor parties, even those held in summer, are always at risk of bad weather, and this can be very trying when it means that you suddenly have to entertain 25 small wet boys in your kitchen. You will need to be prepared for the weather, not only with umbrellas and rubber boots ("Wellies," after the Duke of Wellington), but also with lots of silly ideas for dull afternoons.

You may wonder when you will see one of the pea soup London fogs you have read about. Although once one of London's most famous hallmarks as a city, the fog has now virtually ceased to exist. Thanks to the Clean Air Act of 1956, which requires the burning of smokeless fuels, choking smog-fog has disappeared.

HOW THE BRITISH SEE US

So far, the comments in this guide have attempted to highlight some of the cultural differences Americans may notice when they come to live in Britain. Another part of the sensation that you are in a different cultural group is seeing or feeling the British reaction to you and your Americanness. Sometimes you can feel the impact of a label being slapped on. Just as you may have stereotypical images of "the perfect Englishman," or "a typical Scot," the British will let you know that they recognize you as one of a tribe—"just like an American!" Although this is undeniably true, it can be uncomfortable if you are not sure what this means to them.

One of the pressures you may feel is that you are being considered part of a group which is universally naive, gauche, boisterous, and childish. It is as if American adults have not yet learned all the things British children are expected to learn about being quiet and cooling down emotionally. Our culture values all that enthusiasm, bounce, energy, and desire to do a job properly and solve problems quickly, but not the British.

We often seem to be overly success-oriented and boastful of our own achievements to the British, who value the amateur and the generalist over the expert. They also feel that we are too concerned with the value of things and that we openly discuss all sorts of money issues in a way that is embarrassing to many British people. Our interest in how much things cost and how much we earn makes us seem ostentatious or even crass.

Suddenly, it can seem as if we are being criticized for being all the things American culture teaches us to be. When this happens, slow down, take a deep breath, and try not to take it too

personally. Like all prejudices, these ideas will be adjusted as friendships develop and there are opportunities for acquaintances to become closer.

PART II - DAILY LIFE

Perhaps you are beginning to get the feel of some of the cultural differences between British and American life that have been identified by Americans living in Britain. The detail that follows is the most subjective, personal, and likely-to-change material in the guide; it may or may not prove useful to you. Use it when it is relevant, but do not be bound by it. This section does not contain rules for behavior when in Britain. It rather points out situations others have stumbled into which illustrate the points made earlier, with suggestions on how they arise and what it all means. In between the personal bits are some useful (though changeable) hard facts, such as telephone numbers and sources of further information.

When, after a few months (or weeks), you are beginning to despair, read one of the hilarious books on culture shock listed in the bibliography. Sometimes there is nothing so helpful as having a good laugh at the things about being in Britain that have been driving you crazy.

LANGUAGE

Location Identification

One area in which Americans often need clarification and guidance is in the use of the terms "Britain," "British," and "English." If you use the word "England" or talk of "the English" to a Scot, a Welshman, or an Irishman, be careful to mean it. England is a geographical area within the British Isles, which only relatively recently (in British minds) has been united with Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland to become the country called "The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland." Scotland was, until the reign of James VI (James I to the English) an entirely separate country, often allied with France against England. Similarly, Wales and Northern Ireland have separate histories. The inhabitants of these countries tend to think of themselves as English, Scottish (never "Scotch," incidentally, which can apply to food, drink, or clothing, but not to people), Welsh, and Irish first, and British second. An immigrant may become British, but never English, because to be English implies having a cultural history, which no new arrival could possibly have. Confusingly, the term "British" can mean the inhabitants of Commonwealth countries, former dominions, or colonies.

In general, it is safest to refer to "Britain" and "the British" unless you mean only that section of the United Kingdom to the south of Scotland and the east of Wales.

A New Language

Of course, you already know that British and American pronunciations differ. You may not know that the British ear is acutely tuned to detect minute gradations of accent that may be indicators of regional or class background. You will enjoy learning to listen for these differences, too. In general, British pronunciation is rather quick and staccato to our ears; we often sound languid and drawling to them. They speak very precisely, while we tend to slur sounds together. The cockney glottal stop makes that accent difficult for us to understand.

Words often sound as if they have been cut in half, as in “water,” which comes out “waw-uh,” or “li-ow” for “little.”

The greatest difficulties often occur when asking directions, because place names and proper names are especially troublesome. They are very often pronounced quite differently from the way they are spelled, and there is no way of knowing until you are corrected. Leicester Square is a central point in London, and its name often comes up in conversations about getting around in London. Of course, you know that final “er” is pronounced rather like “uh,” but you would have to be told that the word is pronounced “lestuh.” There are a lot more, some more astonishing than others: Hertfordshire is “Heart f’d shur,” Guildford is “Gil f’d,” Cockburn is “Co burn,” Beauchamp is “Beech um,” and Cholmondeley is “Chumley.”

Just to add to the fun, you must learn a new vocabulary. You probably already know a few of the words that are different in British English. You will also find that even when you use the American word, you are usually understood because the British watch a lot of American films and television. Part of the fun of your first few days in Britain will be listening to the charming accents, and discovering the British words for everyday things. If you are interested in reading up on these words, get one of the reference books listed in the bibliography, and make some notes. You may need these words quickly—in cooking, for instance, or if you must have repair work done on your car.

Sometimes we use the same words differently: “pudding” is often used to mean any dessert. A “biscuit” is a cookie or cracker, while the British word for a baking powder biscuit is “scone,” which you may hear pronounced with a short “o” as in on. “Jelly” usually refers to what we call Jello, although it can also have the familiar meaning.

The most embarrassing differences have to do with slightly (or very) naughty words. “Bum” means bottom or rear end. I once brought my guitar into school, thinking my class of seven-year-olds would enjoy a sing-along. After I tried to teach them “Hallelujah, I’m a bum!” I had no credibility for a week! “Rubber,” on the other hand, is a word all small children use. It means eraser. I used to hear the lament, “Please, Miss, I’ve lost my rubber!” every day at school. You will see lots of twinkling eyes if you do not use the British English word “trousers,” because “pants” means underpants. An English friend visiting New York was amused to hear the guide announce that the restaurant they were going to would not accept women wearing pants. How would they check? she wondered, with a giggle.

One last example, which combines the British use of an understated vocabulary with a hidden cultural component is the phrase, “May I have a word with you?” When a British person says this potent phrase to you, watch out! Get all your antennae into action, because it means that a very important message is about to be delivered to you. If the speaker is your child’s teacher, you are about to be told that expulsion is near. If he is your boss, you may be getting a final warning. If he is your doctor, he is about to tell you that you have a month to live. This vital message will come to you completely disguised in charm, courtesy, and good wishes, but the speaker will expect you to get it. If you do not, be blunt, and try to have it clarified. This innocent-sounding question, “May I have a word with you?” carries a powerful unspoken component.

All the words in that phrase are English words with which you are completely familiar. What you may not understand are the very different ways the words are being used. Enjoy the books which help you learn some of the different words, but try also to be alert to the fact that gesture and other non-verbalized aspects of the language are used in quite unfamiliar ways and may contribute to more misunderstandings than the words being used. Some of the unspoken messages contained in the example phrase we are using are courtesy (to the point of obscuring the message), understatement (a word hardly describes the weight of this message), and the general pleasantness and good will with which the message is imparted (which obscure the seriousness and importance of the content, but which serve to deflect possible confrontational and emotional scenes).

Without taking these examples too seriously, you may be able to glean from them enough to increase your cultural sensitivity to some ways of looking at things that are rather different in Britain.

More About Personal Privacy or Reserve

The British, especially those living in the Southeast, prize privacy to an extent difficult for us to understand. Their noticeable politeness is a reflection of this, as is their reputation for being reserved. The outgoing friendliness of Americans can seem intrusive and brutal without that intention. Let us have a look at how this might affect everyday transactions.

Invisible Wall

In public situations, it might help if you could imagine that British people have an invisible wall around them, on which it is polite to knock before beginning a conversation. When asking directions, for example, it is good to say, “Excuse me,” and then wait for acknowledgment before proceeding. Americans knock with a smile; it is a big smile, with full, direct eye contact. We use it to initiate and conclude conversations, and for many other purposes throughout the dialogue. While British people certainly smile, they more often “knock” by using silence, posture, short indirect eye contact, and polite phrases to buffer the impact.

In fact, the British use altogether less eye contact than we do. Not looking at others helps keep the invisible wall in place, and you will notice that in small, enclosed places, like trains and lifts, people stand quietly, looking down or away from other people. Katherine Whitehorse, a leading British journalist, in her book on social behavior, replied to a question on how to behave in trains: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do; when I am in Britain, I always try to give the impression that I have died in my seat.” But she does, then, go on to say that a single innocuous remark about the weather or the train is acceptable. If this should be picked up, you may even find yourself in conversation.

American Decibels

Americans, even those from the most crowded cities, have a sense of wide open spaces. We talk to each other across considerable distance and do not mind particularly if other people standing nearby overhear the conversations we are having in supermarkets and on buses. For these reasons and others, Americans seem to be talking very loudly when in Britain. For

when British people get into conversation, the invisible wall goes around them, and keeps the conversation private. This is true for even the most casual encounter. That important "Excuse me" at the beginning of a conversation gives the other person time to become attentive, and draw nearer so that the voices can be kept lower.

Personal Space

When queuing, British people do not push up and stand very close together. Living on this crowded little island has meant that people are used to being physically near to each other while maintaining personal discretion. Look at the ways British people stand and sit: they tuck themselves in and make themselves small. Arms, legs, and chins are kept well into the body. In conversation, they do not touch each other as much as we do. It is not their custom to shake hands, though they know it is ours, and will certainly respond, but they may feel uncomfortable if patted or nudged.

When two British people inadvertently jostle each other on a train, for instance, they both instantly recoil, muttering, "Sorry!" They are apologizing for breaking through the invisible wall. This difference applies even in situations in which we would feel we are being especially polite. When President Reagan took the Queen's elbow to help her up some steps, the "incident" was widely reported in the British press. He could have offered his elbow to her, but nobody touches the Queen!

These are all examples of the different language British people speak. As you become aware of the non-verbal components of British English, you will find yourself using them to communicate your words more effectively, and the understanding you gain may help you to know that the famous British reserve is not about being cold or unfriendly, but is just about a kind of personal privacy which is a deep and important part of the culture.

Politeness

The real cultural rubs often occur just when we feel we are behaving in a civilized and polite manner, but we are getting signals that suggest we are being offensive in some way. We may feel this through our children's behavior—when they are being acceptable and pleasant, but we feel frowns aimed at them—or within our own transactions. "Polite behavior" is different in Britain. It takes years to acquire "nice manners," and suddenly we all have to learn a new set of rules. But while we may want to learn enough not to offend, we do not necessarily want to change our ways entirely.

STARTING OUT

Asking Directions

In common with most other cities of the Old World, London has streets that seem narrow, twisting, and short to American eyes. Visitors and, indeed, life-long residents may need to ask the way. Remember that when you speak American English, it may sound abrupt and discourteous to British ears; they appreciate the padded knock: "Excuse me, please…(pause)…. Could you possibly tell me…?" When not taken by surprise, the British are extremely courteous and helpful, and often go out of their way to show you where to go. When they have described the route you "must" take, they will frequently repeat the

instructions to be certain you have understood. If the information is complicated, they may tell you how to get to a place where you can ask further. Very often, the way to go will be described in terms of pubs: “Go along here, past The George, and take the first turning on the left.”

Meeting People

Here you are largely on familiar territory and, as someone carrying American cultural baggage, you are even at a slight advantage. This is because you are practiced at talking to total strangers, and you are—relatively speaking—not shy. It is customary in Britain to be introduced to someone before engaging them in conversation; just walking up to a neighbor or another parent at the school gate and introducing yourself is not usual. On the whole, no one will mind if you do it—particularly in informal situations. But if you do initiate conversations without introductions, do try to be sensitive to any possible discomfort, and try to understand that this does not mean they do not want to know you. Even for everyday matters, it is usual to have an introduction, and this applies to anything from meeting a neighbor to opening a bank account. If the acquaintance is important for business reasons, or the meeting is part of a formal occasion, it is almost essential that you find someone to introduce you. Large receptions are an exception to this rule: there, Americans can facilitate conversation and introductions among guests who might otherwise find it awkward to circulate.

Since introductions are important, they will be expected from you, too. Do not just tell your British friends to call up your babysitter or solicitor (lawyer); they will feel much happier if you make the introduction. For formal events, you may find it useful to refer to Debrett’s book (listed in the bibliography) for information on introductions involving those with titles and royalty.

Introductory Conversations

Americans talk easily, and very quickly reveal how they feel about things. When British people are meeting others for the first time, they keep the conversation general, can tolerate a good deal of silence between comments, and do not usually reveal their inner feelings or even very much about their personal lives. It is a good rule of thumb to proceed slowly, allowing the other person plenty of time, and to keep to neutral topics, such as the weather, travel, gardening, and hobbies. In general, it is best to avoid the sorts of questions that might be found on a form: Where do you live? What do you do? Where did you go to school? In a new situation in which you might not be expected to know anything about the person, these questions can feel personal and intrusive. If the other person indicates willingness to discuss one of these subjects, then, of course, it is perfectly all right to ask a question about it; if you are gathered because of a common interest or in connection with work, then those areas would be available for exploration without giving offense. But on the whole, it is best to let conversational topics emerge, rather than probing into the unknown with someone you have not met before and know nothing about.

There is little doubt that the conversational exchange is a potential area of culturally based tension. When, in early or casual meetings, we express strong or even moderate feelings,

British people squirm. On the other hand, after hours of neutral conversation, we begin to feel that we would like to find someone with whom to have a significant conversation.

EXPECTATIONS OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR

In general, the unspoken rules concerning behavior in public are the same as those you already know from American life, taking into account the walls of privacy. In small spaces, such as lifts, for example, conversation generally stops until it can be continued where it will not be overheard. In addition to the general observations made in this section, you may wish to note the comments made about the behavior of children in public, for example.

Safety

There cannot be many large cities in the United States in which you will be as safe as you will be in London. Compared to anything you are likely to be familiar with, the public transport systems and the streets are safe. Crime does occur, however, and much of it is burglary, but neither the burglars nor the general population are armed, and everyday murder, of the sort familiar to Americans, is virtually unknown.

Related to this, perhaps, is the fact that pubs, parks, and public transport systems all close down relatively early at night. It is difficult and expensive to get a drink after 11:00 p.m., and you will find that your British friends, especially those without cars, will make their way home about that time to catch the last train.

Despite the comparative safety of London, you would be wise to observe the general rules of safety and security necessary in any large city. It is necessary to lock securely your house, car, and bicycle when you leave them. Check with your neighbors about local practices and special problems. It is not a good idea to advertise the fact that you are away, and a helpful neighbor can be a boon, taking in deliveries and keeping a watchful eye open. Most areas of London are safe for pairs to walk in, but it is best to avoid those places where you might feel isolated and conspicuous, especially after dark. You will be quite safe using public transport, even at night, but the faint-hearted may wish to travel in the last car of underground trains with the guard. If you have teenagers who must get around on their own, especially after dark, you can get an idea of neighborhood policy from those around you. If in doubt, better be safe than sorry. British youngsters are generally accompanied, either by adults or companions, so you may have to plan to use your car or a taxi service until they develop good friendship networks.

Queuing

The queue represents am attempt to impose structure on chaos. You may even grow to love the queue and miss it when you go to a country that does not revere it. The queue is another way to show courtesy by a public acknowledgment of the axiom “First come, first served.”

Most queues are obvious—lines extending from a ticket window, for instance—and it is clear where you must stand to join. At bus stops and some small shops, however, it is not always clear that there is a queue or where you should stand. If in doubt, you cannot go wrong by asking, “Are you in the queue?” or “Is this the queue?” There may be only one

other person at the bus stop, but it is still customary to queue there, and the bus queue usually forms to the left of the sign. Oddly, these very tidy bus queues tend to disintegrate into chaos as soon as the bus pulls up. One stop may serve several buses, and some people will remain queuing for another bus, while others filter out and rush onto the bus.

In very small shops there is a mental queue, and customers present themselves to be served strictly in the order in which they entered the shop.

The queue represents a manifestation of the idea of fair play, and queue jumping does cause anger. Queuing also demonstrates the considerable degree of British patience and unwillingness to complain. Faced by an orderly queue, quietly awaiting service, the British shopkeeper or public servant feels little impetus to work quickly or get an assistant. The slower pace of British life can often be most acutely felt while languishing in a long and utterly quiescent queue.

Different Concepts of Service

The aspect of cultural difference that is most likely to be discovered early on and with considerable irritation on both sides is the whole area of service and shopping roles. Just put that polite, helpful, tolerant British person who gave you directions into a shop or behind a cafe counter and a transformation occurs. Courtesy and willingness give way to sullen resentment and animosity. This is an exaggeration, of course, but there is some truth to it, and it may be useful to know that it may not result from anything you have done—it is just part of life here. Perhaps it can be partially explained by the historical fact that, until recently, service had been expected as a right by those in power, rather than being offered as a straight exchange by the server for reward or by agreement. Or perhaps it is a feature of the fact that, even today, service jobs are less often done by students or others in need of starting somewhere, but are often poorly paid, dead-end jobs, which the worker has little chance of escaping purely by endeavor. Whatever the reasons, you need not feel rebuked if you do not always get service with a smile. The United States has different traditions surrounding the area of service, connected with our different history.

Your experiences in small local shops, such as the greengrocers and the news agency will be very different. There, the atmosphere is welcoming and pleasant, with a personal touch that will delight you. You may be called “luv” or “darlin”’ and it is likely that your preferences will be remembered. But even in this situation, there are differences. The buyer or customer has relatively less status than we are accustomed to enjoy. The shop is the domain of its owner, whom the shop assistant represents; the customer is expected to wait to be attended, and does not handle food or other items unless given permission to do so. Nevertheless, once these differences are accounted for, you will be given exceedingly pleasant service and personal attention.

GETTING OUT INTO THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Leave your car at home and get out on foot to become acquainted with your neighborhood. The streets around your house and the people who inhabit them are likely to provide you with your first and often most lasting impressions of British life. The local milkman, newsagent, and greengrocer are likely to become part of your daily life, and you may well

find that when the time comes to leave this post, part of the sadness will be at saying goodbye to these local folk.

Milkman

The milkman delivers daily and milk is sold at a fixed price everywhere, so there is no extra charge. In most places, however, you have no choice of business, because the dairies decide among themselves which will operate in what street. In addition to milk, your milkman sells all sorts of other basic foods, such as a wide range of dairy products, bread, sugar, cereal, and even potatoes. Some of these things must be ordered in advance and the price will be the same as in the dairy shop—not necessarily the best bargain, but useful to know about. He expects to be paid on Saturday for the week's order, though most dairies do not mind if a week is carried over occasionally.

The milk round is often a family concern, with children or grandchildren helping on the weekend. You may be disconcerted to discover that there is no itemized bill: a sum is simply announced. Of course, you may question this, but the milkman would find it very time-consuming if all his customers required itemized bills, so there is a certain amount of trust involved in this relationship—and this is the general rule in local transactions.

Newsagent

Somewhere near to you there will be a small shop selling newspapers, cigarettes, candy, and often other small items such as greeting cards or basic foodstuffs. For a small fee the newsagent will arrange for you to have papers and magazines delivered to your home, or you can place an order that you could then pick up from the shop. If you do have things delivered, you will be expected to go to the shop to pay your bill every few weeks. You will not necessarily be sent a bill, unless considerable time has passed and the newsagent is beginning to wonder if you are still around. If you do get a written bill, it is likely to record only the total amount due to date. It is customary to give the person who delivers the papers a small sum of money at Christmas.

Greengrocer

Ask your neighbors to recommend a grocer, but do not be afraid to make your own survey. Some shops offer a wider variety of unusual fruits and vegetables for the non-English palate, but these are often slightly costlier establishments. Sometimes particular items may be ordered in advance, such as Halloween pumpkins or Christmas trees. It is fun to be adventurous and try something unfamiliar. After my first winter of (mainly) brussel sprouts and cooked carrots, I decided I would buy something unfamiliar every week and cook it up for our delectation. The first week, I got a plateful of hot licorice-flavored green stuff—it was fennel, which I now love raw in salad, but, the cooked version was inedible. Later, by this trial-and-error method, I discovered the delicious Jerusalem artichoke, which looks like a cross between a new potato and a ginger root. Be brave! Even yucky stuff can make the family laugh for a week.

As with many local shops, in the greengrocers it is customary to queue for service. If there is no obvious end-of-the-queue, you could stand expectantly near the door, waiting for an

indication from the grocer that he is ready to serve you. It is not considered polite to handle the items on display or select the ones you want, unless your opinion is asked: This is the grocer's territory and he is in charge: ask and ye shall receive. People usually ask for one item at a time, often starting with the heaviest things first, so they can go in the bottom of the bag. If you have not brought a shopping bag with you, you will have to ask for one and pay for it. It is infuriating to go out without a bag and then have to buy another, especially when you know that there are dozens breeding merrily in the cupboard at home. The grocer adds his totals in his head as he goes along, only occasionally resorting to a penciled tally. It is worth cultivating your greengrocer: before long, your children will be getting samples and you will be given the finest of anything you require—but this will be because you are known and liked, and it will take a little time.

Payment in Local Shops

As you try to build up a relationship with your local shopkeepers, remember that they do appreciate exact change or small bills. Oddly, it does not seem usual to offer a coin in payment over the required amount in order to simplify the making of change. This just seems to confuse the issue, and is rarely done. So you will not be able to avoid collecting a lot of heavy British coins by this method; you will just have to get rid of them by offering exact change.

Supermarkets

More and more people in Britain are using supermarkets, and there are several large chain stores that stock a variety of foodstuffs. Shopping for family food will be a largely familiar experience—with a few of the invariable exceptions. The British, through habit and lack of space, do not buy in bulk. They tend to shop frequently and to buy small-sized packets, valuing freshness over the guarantee of not running out or of economy. Some supermarkets have parking lots; most are to be found on busy "high streets" (main roads) with no easy parking for several blocks. Store hours tend to be more limited than in the United States, but most supermarkets are open in the early evening and on Sundays from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Americans often find the greatest problems at the checkout counters, where service can be slow and not helpful. You are expected to bag your own purchases. As in most queues, the time passes slowly—it is a good opportunity to practice patience and the art of meditation.

Street Markets

You will enjoy shopping in the many street markets in London. There will be neighborhood ones, selling mainly fruits and vegetables, as well as those famous throughout the city for specializing in particular goods. You will need a lot of time to look and haggle a bit, though you are not expected to bargain very much these days. You might try a lower offer for items at a junk stall, but food usually is sold for the price on the signs. If haggling appeals to you, try it; but if it does not, you need not indulge. Street markets are not the places to expect efficiency. But you will find bargains and also get a chance to meet some of the ordinary people of London at work. There are too many markets to describe in this guide, but they are listed in most tourist publications and major guidebooks. Do plan to visit some of them.

LEISURE

Pubs

One of the most fun ways of getting to know your neighborhood will be to check out the pubs. The British public house bears little resemblance to the American bar. The pub is a local gathering place, with its own individual atmosphere, often spilling out onto the pavement or into a garden. The lights are on, and amiable sporting events, in the form of darts or billiards, are the order of the day. Traditionally, pub hours have been 11:00 a.m.–3:00 p.m. and 5:30 p.m.–11:00 p.m., with shorter hours on Sundays: 12:00–2:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m.–10:30 p.m. Now, with the new licensing laws, many are open for longer hours, and some even all day. You must be 16 years old to enter and 18 to buy alcohol, but many pubs have gardens, and on summer evenings the whole family gathers for pleasantries. As long as adults get the drinks from the counter and alcohol is consumed only by those 18 and over, all is well.

There are usually two doors to each pub. One is labeled “Public Bar,” and the other, “Saloon” or “Lounge Bar.” Traditionally, the public bar was a sparsely furnished room, often with sawdust on the floor, in which men could gather to be themselves. Women were, and still are, to some extent, expected to use the more comfortable and more elaborately decorated saloon in which they can sit down in a quieter and more genteel atmosphere. As these two sections of the pub are often separated only by a half wall, reaching only to the central serving bar behind which the barman moves to serve both groups, the distinction seems rather forced these days. Today, a woman would use the public bar if she were very casually dressed—in trousers and Wellingtons after a country walk, for instance—but women more usually use the saloon bar.

It is perfectly acceptable to go to a pub and not order an alcoholic drink, although few serve hot drinks like tea or coffee: a wide variety of fruit juices and carbonated beverages is available. Oddly, the queue does not really exist in a pub. The counter is long, and you simply get as close to it as you can and wait for the barman to catch your eye. It is not accepted behavior to call out or wave your hand in an effort to get service. As you will so often find, you are a guest in the territory of the landlord, and you are expected to wait until it is convenient for him to serve you. But do make your eyes available—when his glance meets yours, you are almost there.

Many British people go to pubs at lunchtime, as most serve food at that time. Note: few serve food in the evenings; pub meals are lunches. The food may range from sandwiches and meat pies to full meals of shepherd’s pie, sausage-egg-and-chips, or other standard menu items. Usually you go to the food counter for your plate and then to the bar counter for your drink. Beers, like cheeses, are made locally in most parts of the country, so when you are out of London, do sample the local brew.

If you go to a pub with British friends, you may encounter the round. When a group gathers for a drink, it is customary for one member of the group to place the order at the bar counter and pay for all the drinks of that round. To make it fair, it is then incumbent upon another member of the group to notice when the glasses are getting low and get the next round. And

so on. To be fair to five friends, you must drink five rounds; when the group is larger, so is the commitment. One way around this is to divide large groups into sub-groups. But it is important to play the game. That is, the rounds should be allowed to move along easily, and you should make sure to take your turn with the rest.

Apart from finding a congenial local pub, you may wish to do some serious pub-crawling: perhaps you want to find a pub featured in a favorite film or novel or one that served Dickens or Swift regularly. There are several commercial guidebooks on pubs to help you. Most pubs are leased on franchise to the landlord by one of the large breweries. They are organized rather like gas stations in the United States: the brewers (Courage or Watneys, for example) own the pubs and distribute their beers through them. Individual landlords actually work for the brewery. There are also free houses, which are privately owned and stock any beer the owner wants to sell. These are worth looking for, especially when you want to try a regional beer.

Parks

You will find that Londoners enjoy and use their parks and green spaces. In common with residents in many European cities, Londoners and their families (and their dogs) find strolling along park walks a pleasant pastime. Usually well kept and thoughtfully planned, most parks are important sources of recreation—pleasing and relatively safe. Often they are locked at night. Adults usually accompany children in parks and playgrounds, despite the fact that many play areas have an attendant.

Do join British residents in exploring and delighting in your local parks and open spaces. Guidebooks and maps will describe them more fully, and you may choose between those which are essentially gardens, often surrounding a stately home, and those which provide full sports and recreational facilities.

Sports

There are a wide variety of sporting and recreational facilities available in London and the Southeast. Inquire at the Embassy Community Liaison Office for specific details. In general, the sports commonplace to the British, but possibly less familiar to Americans, may be worth mentioning. Cricket is particularly English and played mainly by Commonwealth countries. It bears a resemblance to baseball, but is very little like it. You will be able to strike up a conversation by asking for some explanations; there are some wonderful terms, such as “silly mid-on” and “the slips” which you may want to find out more about. Village cricket, in which the locals turn out for a pleasant match on Sunday afternoons on the village green, is a purely English experience—and a delightful one. Football (soccer) is as popular in Britain as in Europe and South America. International seasons are particularly exciting. As a neighborhood game, it has much to recommend it, not least because it can be fun with as few as two players and a ball. Canoeing, sculling, swimming, and other water sports are very popular to this island population. Riding, of course, is widely available, though the broad Western saddles are not. Pub and club games such as billiards and snooker are very popular. Snooker, in particular, enjoys wide television coverage. Badminton, tennis, and squash players will find little difficulty locating excellent courts. Hill-climbing, pot-holing,

hang-gliding, and flying clubs cater to those in need of adventure. In fact, whatever your sporting enthusiasm, you are likely to find an active British group nearby.

Theater

If you like going to the theater, London will surely be a glorious assignment for you. The choice is vast, so do explore fringe and pub theater, as well as the spectacular West End shows. Booking tickets by telephone is commonplace and easy, especially if you have a credit card. Some small or fringe theaters do not have credit card facilities, but all will hold tickets for you to collect by a designated time.

The National Theatre reserves a small number of tickets for sale on the day of the performance, for which you may queue in the morning. The box office opens at 10:00 a.m., and it is wise to arrive 30–60 minutes before that for a popular show. The Society of West End Theatres (SWET) ticket booth in Leicester Square sells tickets for half-price on the day of the performance. You can expect to stand in line from early afternoon for the most popular shows. Many theaters allow queuing for "returns," and this is a good way to see a sold-out show. Call individual box offices to find out what to do. Some theaters, including the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, and the Royal Opera House have membership plans that allow you to book by mail for a season of performances before tickets go on sale to the general public. If all else fails, you can book through a ticket agency, for which you may pay about 20 percent additional charge.

Tickets are arranged as follows: Stalls (Orchestra)—expensive, especially toward the front, but often cheaper at the sides and very front; dress circle (Balcony)—more expensive at the front; the first rows of the Circle are considered to be the best in the house; upper circle—higher and cheaper.

Dress is often very casual, and it is perfectly all right to go in whatever you happen to have been wearing that day, although some people do enjoy making a special day of it. Ushers are not tipped, but if you leave your coat, you may see a saucer for coins (20–50p). Programs cost money, and latecomers are often not admitted until there is a suitable break in the action. British audiences do not customarily interrupt the action of the play to applaud the entrance of a well-known performer or a fine speech; applause is reserved until the end of the act.

Ice cream and chocolates are nearly always for sale, as are cold (bar) drinks. Coffee and sandwiches are becoming more widely available. Intermission ("interval") drinks may be ordered before the start of the play; this saves crushing at a tiny bar when time is short. Pay for your order in advance, and the bartender will tell you where to find your drinks, usually on a table or shelf away from the bar area. There is no extra charge or tip required.

WHAT TO DO AND WHAT TO WEAR

At Work

By this time, the themes of cultural difference will be familiar to you. The British at work inspire an atmosphere that is slightly more formal than ours, with status demarcations more

clearly observed. First names are used less often and less readily, and between men, the use of the surname alone is common. Strong feelings are often evident about the divide between management and labor, for this is a battlefield in the class war.

Modesty and understatement are usual, and this is especially noticeable in the area of job applications and interviews. It can be counter-productive to be too positive, especially when you are discussing your own capabilities. Rather than inflating past experiences to give credence to his suitability for a job, the British applicant can succeed by merely suggesting his interest and modestly pointing out one or two rather similar situations in which he managed to cope. The prospective employer might be suspicious of anyone who seems to be boasting of his suitability too much, wondering what the candidate is covering up. In addition, paper qualifications are not as essential as we may be used to. There is much opportunity for on-the-job training, but it is often undocumented. People in very highly specialized fields may reach the top without academic certification of any sort, because of the expertise they have gained by experience.

The American worker might find it unusual that, once established in the job, the employee is not continually evaluated in any way. Professional workers, in particular, have considerable scope to create a personal style and to initiate change without constant supervision. This reluctance to measure an employee against an expected and defined standard of work can also mean that some firms seem willing to carry weak personnel, who apparently contribute little to general productivity. It would be considered harsh to fire an employee simply because he was not very good at his job; usually, he would have to commit some clear offense before such a suggestion would be deemed justifiable. At work, as elsewhere, the British are loathe to make demands, to confront, to cause a scene, and much personal eccentricity is tolerated.

Embassy personnel will find that the business lunch is a common type of “representation.” The British employee tends to feel that his free time is his own, to be spent with his family and in leisure pursuits, and not to be mixed with business. Spouses, except at the highest levels, will not often be expected to devote themselves to business entertaining. When considering the implications of business entertaining, it is important to remember that the acceptance of an invitation to dinner in your home would carry with it the obligation for your guests to return the invitation.

Young people are not expected to work while they are still students, and casual jobs are difficult to find. Babysitting and similar paid jobs among friends and neighbors are less common practice than in the United States, and this may be a problem for you, both when your children are small and you need a sitter, and when your teenagers want to earn some extra money.

Using the Telephone

The conventions concerning the social use of the telephone are not different from those you already know: it is good to try to call at convenient times, to keep business calls brief, and to use the telephone as an informal way of thanking people, as when thanking a friend for a dinner party.

Because there are no free phone calls, it is customary to offer to pay for calls made from the homes of other people–even brief, local calls. It is best not to have to use other home telephones at all, but if a call is necessary, offer to pay for the call or leave a coin near the phone.

In fact, having and using a telephone is more expensive than in the United States. Bills are sent quarterly but are now itemized. You are billed for the number of units used, not calls made, and even local calls are timed and charged accordingly. International calls are individually listed, and have become more reasonable in cost. Inexpensive alternative companies exist for long-distance service, in addition to BT service.

Many firms offering a service by telephone (such as British Rail or London Electricity), use an auto-queue system, which means that calls will be answered in order, so it pays to dial and then hang on. Sometimes you will be told that you are in a queue, other times there is no indication that anything is happening—no Muzak or recording—but you are in a queue, and you will lose your place if you hang up and start again.

Public telephones are reasonably plentiful, and some require the use of a phone card, more convenient than searching for the right coins. Cards can be purchased in various denominations. From pay phones, if you need the police or assistance, you can dial 999 without a coin. Tell your children about this in case they ever need help while they are out and about. When the operator answers, you must say which of the three emergency services, fire, police, or ambulance, you require and wait to be connected.

Clothing

As mentioned in the section about the weather, many people find it most convenient and comfortable to dress in many layers. You will probably find suits, cardigans and v-necked sweaters, and warm accessories useful. Rainwear is much used, clearly, but it is more often likely to be good quality wool or wool-blend coats for many weathers rather than the plastic emergency cover-all.

Clothes are not always obvious indicators of status, and selection of clothing is felt to be a matter of individual preference, so a wide variety of dress is accepted without question. This is particularly true for young people, who explore personal style through clothing. Among the young, it is the Americans who can be spotted by their uniforms: running shoes, jeans, and preppy wear. British youngsters experiment more and enjoy dressing for self-expression. When dressing for sporting activities, British people usually “kit out” in appropriate gear: whites for badminton and tennis, jodhpurs and hard hats for riding. This does not mean that jeans and sweatshirt would be frowned on for these events; it is just the custom, possibly left over from school days, to dress appropriately for sport.

As usual, Shepherd Mead has an amusing, but accurate, comment to make on dress: “For all occasions other than sports, for which you will need special costumes, you are safe if you follow this rule: dress as you would for an informal funeral and you will be correct and inconspicuous everywhere.” He goes on, “Many women ask: ‘If it is really too cool to wear

cottons in the summer, should I bring them anyway?' The answer is yes, you should. They do wear cotton in the summer, though of course they wear a heavy sweater on top."

There is no need to dress up particularly for the theater or concerts, where anything is acceptable. Invitations to more formal affairs usually indicate the general level of dress expected.

"Lounge suit" attire means it will be informal: men will wear business suits, and women, day dresses. Invitations marked "informal" generally mean that men will wear dark suits, and women, formal day wear. "Black tie" or "dinner jacket" indicates a long gown or dressy short one for women and black tie for men. "White tie" or "evening dress" indicates a very formal affair, with tailcoat and white tie for men, and long gowns with gloves for women.

For daily meetings and informal parties, dress as you like—it is part of the fun of being in Britain. Your hostess may be in a dark-toned sweater set and tweeds while you are in bright silk. It just means that you are feeling bright and silky—but you may need a thick wool cardigan over the top of it just to cope with the drafts.

Social Gatherings in the Home

As with so much that has been discussed here, social visits respect personal privacy in many ways and can, therefore, seem more formal and arranged than is our usual custom. Dropping in is less common here, and invitations are often issued well in advance. Shepherd Mead advises; "It is a social error in England to live in the present. All the proper English live at least two months in the future…. Buy a 'diary' or small date book. Get it early, by mid-October, or they will be all gone. Carry it everywhere, as the English do."

Always reply immediately to invitations, by telephone or in writing. When invited for drinks, it is usual to stay about an hour; a cocktail party or after-dinner-drinks party might be expected to go on for two hours or so.

At dinner parties, you are not expected to bring a gift for the hostess. If you feel you must, something simple and unobtrusive is best (like flowers or candy), or something small for the children. Adhere to the time stated on an invitation to dinner: while it is not correct to arrive early, it is also inconsiderate to the cook to arrive more than 15 minutes late. At the end of a party, you are always expected to thank the hostess personally and say goodbye. It is not essential to write a thank-you note for an informal party, (a telephone call the following day would be fine) but written thanks are expected after a more formal occasion. You may find that informal social gatherings feel slightly more formal than their American counterparts, and afternoon tea is a good example of this. However informal the invitation may seem, the care with which tea is presented is evident. Bread and butter, cucumber or cress sandwiches, jam tarts, and tiny cakes are commonplace items. It is very difficult for the British to feel they are able to offer hospitality if you do not drink tea. It is the standard drink of friendship, tiredness-after-a-job-well-done, or personal crisis. Indian tea is brewed strong, and is usually taken with milk, while Chinese tea is offered black or with lemon. If you are offered a choice, you might ask for "China tea" if you like it black or "Indian" if you like it white.

One book on British customs states that “the making of tea is one of the most deep-seated British rituals, impervious to change,” and goes on to explain differences in regional brewing customs which go back to the Iron Age.

The customs surrounding the sharing of food and connected social conventions vary according to social class, social group, or regional custom. This is an area in which personal exploration will be more useful (and fun!) than a guide. Cooking has improved considerably in Britain. Cooking shows are popular on the BBC and Delia Smith, a local cooking celebrity, is a household word. Asian cooking is very popular, and continental influences can also be found throughout Britain. Home cooking in Britain has been influenced by the variety of cultures here and the wider opportunities for travel that exist for Brits today. Outside London the foreign influence is perhaps not as strong, and the Sunday pub lunch is alive and well throughout the British countryside.

Even in informal dining, there are noticeable differences between British and American practices. The silverware (“cutlery”) is different, as is its arrangement on the table. This is worth noting because your table setting may confuse your British guests. A very full and useful description of British table manners is to be found in *Debrett’s Etiquette and Modern Manners*, but here are some brief comments:

The British use the knife and fork in tandem, and generally feel more comfortable if they are given a knife, even in informal situations in which we might manage with just a fork. The meal often consists of four courses: a starter, a main course, a dessert, and then a selection of cheeses accompanied by crackers (“cheese and biscuits”) and fruit. Many desserts (usually called puddings, no matter what they are) are eaten with a large spoon and fork. Often these are placed above the dinner plate. As in the United States, mothers frown upon elbows on the table, but accept forearms often resting against the edge of the table.

Tea or coffee spoons are often smaller than ours and coffee cups are often larger. I confused some of my friends once when I invited them for dessert and coffee, by presenting them with spoons that were unfamiliar to them. I simply put out lots of teaspoons, which to British eyes were rather small for pudding spoons and rather large for coffee spoons. As it was buffet-style and I was not leading the way (and setting the example), there was a momentary, mild confusion. It may not be necessary to go out and buy a set of British cutlery, but it is just as important to note that there are differences to which you will need to be alert so that everyone can be made to feel comfortable. In the same way, no one expects you to adopt a different menu or eating style. These notes are simply set out to prepare you for possible areas of confusion. Of course, you should go ahead and eat in the way you are accustomed.

Getting Out Into London

Getting Around

Distances to work and school are often greater than Americans are used to traveling, and, as mentioned earlier, you will find yourself doing lots of walking. Because of poor parking facilities, especially in the city center, you will probably not want to drive into town regularly. Most commuters use “the tube,” the familiar name for the London underground

train system. Bus services are direct and often less expensive than the tube, but can be unreliable and unpredictable.

Taxis are plentiful and not outrageously expensive. If their rooftop light is on, they are available for hire, and you can hail them in the street or take the first one standing at a taxi stand ("rank"). You can also telephone for a radio-controlled taxi. Mini-cabs are not so tightly regulated as the London taxis, but reliable companies are useful at night or for long distances. London Transport information (020 7222–1234) will advise on the most direct routes from A to B, and on any special fares available.

Restaurants

There are few cultural differences specific to the restaurant setting. In the more expensive restaurants, men would be wise to wear a tie and dark suit. In less expensive restaurants, and at lunchtime, casual dress is fine, although local people rarely wear shorts and sun tops. As in other service situations, the waiter will not expect to be summoned with a raised hand or voice. Try to use eye contact, or say, "Waiter," when he is in range. The bill may not be itemized, but it usually says whether or not a gratuity charge has been included. If in doubt, ask. The usual service addition would be 10–15 percent.

You will have to ask for water if you want it. A cheese board is a typical dessert item, but if you prefer something sweet, a trolley will be brought to the table after the main course and you can select exactly what you would like from among several mouth-watering choices. Sticky toffee pudding and trifle are English favorites.

Social Gatherings Outside the Home

Tearooms are common gathering places at lunchtime or in the afternoon. Often connected with bakeries, these small cafés tempt the passers-by with luscious-looking cakes and "tarts" in the window.

Pub atmospheres vary, of course. Big downtown pubs are less intimate than village pubs. Most neighborhood pubs are gathering spots for the families in nearby streets. Everyone comes along for a pleasant evening of camaraderie, spent over a pint or two of beer. Pubs are open at lunchtime, so they are obvious gathering places at that time of day. See the section on pubs for more information.

Wine bars are becoming increasingly common in London. These are small bars serving wines and a selection of foods, from cheeses to salads to casseroles. They have different licensing hours from pubs, and cater to a slightly more up-market trade. Even more up-market and trendy are the cocktail bars, in which exotic mixtures with amazing names are available at astonishing prices.

London's private clubs are famous. Some professional and business people join a club in order to have an inexpensive place to take acquaintances for lunch, though many are still for men only. A sponsor generally supports and initiates an application for membership. It is this "by introduction" method of becoming part of a particular group that has helped to entrench the old boy network so firmly.

Some kinds of private club welcome membership from the general public, male and female. These are often clubs that allow after-hours drinks sales, for example, or which bring together people with similar interests. Members of film clubs, for instance, can see films not on general release. Macreadys and other similar clubs cater to theatrical people, who want to get a drink after the curtain has come down (and the pubs are closed).

In addition to the places listed here, British people gather in all the usual places: community centers, sports centers, and churches, in particular. If you are interested in meeting new people, try your local evening school. All London boroughs are part of a vast network of schools offering courses in everything under the sun. Although most are held in the evening, many are also available during the day.

Rites of Passage

In Britain, the 21st birthday has been a special occasion, often marked by a grand event of some sort. This practice is declining somewhat, as young people now come of age in the legal sense at 18. Religious occasions, such as christenings, first communions, bar mitzvahs, weddings, and funerals give sufficient on-the-spot guidance to members of the congregation, and little special information is required in advance. In any case, your acquaintance with the family concerned will give you a source of advice about any special arrangements or requirements. Otherwise, as you might expect in a Western, urban, and largely Christian country, the rites of passage will be broadly familiar.

TRAVELING OUTSIDE LONDON

The British will be the first to tell you that London is not England and you should get out into the countryside to explore the people, the scenery, the wealth of castles and historic monuments, and the array of regional foods. These excursions into the further reaches of the British Isles will be enhanced by the heritage of literature and history that is shared by English-speaking peoples, and much of what is to be seen is unspoiled and caringly preserved.

Each area has its own tourist board, and this source of information can be invaluable to the traveler. Tourist offices, which are usually marked on maps, can provide lists of accommodation, local events and entertainments such as market days and festivals, and other points of particular interest. Country pubs are well worth a visit for their relaxed and neighborly atmosphere. They are also a good place to sample Britain’s wealth of locally produced beers and cheeses.

When you travel outside London, remember that the remarks made in this guide about cultural differences are truer for the Southeast than for other regions. Keep yourself open to new experience and ways of doing things.

Traveling by Public Transportation

British Rail, currently being privatized, serves all parts of the United Kingdom. Many different sorts of tickets are available, so it is worth asking for details about the journeys you plan. Unfortunately, British Rail is notoriously difficult to reach by telephone—dial the

number and wait, but make yourself a cup of coffee first. First class (about 50 percent more), second class, and reserved-seat tickets are available, and there are often special rates for low-priced, same-day, round-trip (“cheap day return”) excursions, season passes, children, bicycles, and more.

Traveling by Car

Mileage cannot be covered in the sort of time you may be used to. Journeys take longer and are more tiring than you might expect. Perhaps the best advice, once again, is to relax and enjoy it. You can often take your car on trains and ferries, which can make long trips easier. When time is limited, putting your car on the train to Scotland is a wonderful way to travel there. You and your family board the sleeping car at night in London, and in the morning you are awakened in Edinburgh with a cup of tea. Instead of being tired out by a very long day of driving through England, you are fresh and ready to explore Scotland. Note that ferry services often must be booked ahead, especially in the peak seasons.

Accommodation

When you check in, be sure to ask what is included and the sorts of services that can be arranged. Private baths are not always available in smaller or lower-priced hotels. When it is possible to get one, there is usually an additional charge. Limits on the use of shared bathrooms may be posted and there may be an extra charge for having a bath or shower. Travelers should bring their own washcloths, as these are not provided.

Even when offered by the very large hotels, laundry and dry cleaning services can take time, so make your requirements clear and get your requests in early.

A standard breakfast is often included in the charge made for the room; find out the serving times. “Half board” is breakfast and one meal; “full board” includes all meals. Breakfast usually consists of cereal, sausage, bacon, egg, tomato, toast, and tea or coffee.

A “pension” is a small hotel or guesthouse and a “bed and breakfast” is just that, often provided in private homes. These can offer the most interest, variety, and charm for the least cost. “Self-catering” accommodation means that a kitchen is provided; there are many cottages of this sort of excellent value for family holidays.

CONCLUSION

“The 2,000-year-old lady by the Thames will entice, beguile, frustrate, and charm you; and just as you begin to pack for home, the tour completed, she will wrap her fingers around your soul, tear at your loyalties, and convert you into a confirmed Anglophile” (from “Assignment London” in *Americans Abroad*—see bibliography).

Any brief guide to the American culture would probably be reduced to making ridiculous and irritating generalizations about the American character, and in just that way, this guide has inevitably made some statements which your experiences will lead you to refute utterly. Differences between our two cultures do exist, but you are a unique person meeting individual British people, and it is difficult to predict how you will react generally. Perhaps it is most important to try to be sensitive to the fact that there may be differences in cultural

assumptions and social customs, and they may exist along the lines described in this guide, but you will probably do best to approach your British experience and the acquaintances you make with an open and interested mind.

Just as individual friendships are slower to blossom in Britain, your friendship with the country and its culture may take time to flourish. You will probably find yourself scorning, raging, disbelieving, and weeping many times while you are here, but there is every possibility that, as you prepare to go home, you will already be planning your return to this charming country and its people.

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